

**SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION  
& WORKPLACE RELATIONS INQUIRY INTO THE  
EDUCATION OF BOYS.**

**Preface**

As a special education teacher of twenty-five years I am deeply concerned about how many of the students in need of “remedial” education are boys. The Launceston Student Workshop Inc. has for twenty-two years operated a program which successfully provides a complementary educational experience which addresses the needs of many boys for whom traditional education had not achieved positive learning outcomes. My perspective is not from an academic research base but purely as an educator and practitioner, who wishes to share their experiences with the committee as examples of the nature of the problem and potential strategies for its improvement.

Australia, above all nations, is closest to the true celebration of diversity. Diversity of culture, diversity of lifestyle, diversity of choice and diversity of abilities. As a nation we believe in valuing people for their intrinsic self worth in combination with their contribution to the fabric of our society as a whole. It is in this context that we view the education of boys. We acknowledge that a blanket approach to education is disadvantaging not only minority groups such as indigenous, ethnic or disabled students but also to a certain extent our male population. Any solution will provide a stronger overall education system capable of catering for the diversity of students within our education system and capable of developing the full potential of every student.

Australia has the opportunity to develop, neither a piece-meal education system nor a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, but rather one truly capable of being the envy of the Western World in its capacity to ensure its outcomes result in lasting benefits both for its recipients and from the contribution made by all its citizens.

**Gender Differences**

In my teaching experience, which ranges from Kindergarten to Grade 12 gender differences effect not only a student’s way of looking at the world but also their assimilation and accommodation of this information. Whether these differences are

biological or sociological seems academic as no student exists outside their family or community influences and, whether we like it or not, the differences between the sexes are reinforced through media, public interaction and peer or family verbal and non-verbal communication.

The stereotypical masculine traits of:

- a preference for kinesthetic rather than linguistic or aural learning,
- concrete rather than abstract thinking,
- spatial awareness rather than logical sequencing,
- attention to detail rather than the gestalt,
- and loyalty to the group rather than the individuals needs;

are all reinforced and celebrated in the sporting arena and in some traditionally male trade vocations. However the same traits and preferences are belittled in the academic arena as of lesser value than the more creative and 'intellectual' stereotypical female traits. The boys I have taught have tended to prefer to work alone if needing to concentrate on getting a job done whereas girls more often elect to collaborate if given a choice. Boys tend to focus on outcomes whereas girls are more process orientated.

These sweeping generalisations must be taken for what they are worth as mere subjective observations and must be taken within the limited context of my work in special education. However they serve to illuminate a potential conflict between an ideal learning environment for male as opposed to female students. The very characteristics, which make our boys exceptional athletes and sporting protégés make, their academic school experiences not only less rewarding but potentially frustrating and humiliating.

### **Boys literacy needs & socialisation skills in the early & middle years of schooling.**

Within our existing Australian Community and culture we are ambivalent in our expectations of male role models whereas female role models are more consistent. We expect our male footballers and corporate raiders to be aggressive, competitive men of action, however we expect our husbands and sons to be able to compromise, partners and negotiators, who can discuss their own emotions and issues as well as our own.

Females however are consistently expected to be supportive, collaborative and assertive, solving problems or conflicts by talking through win-win scenarios.

The mixed messages fed to our boys from their earliest social contacts undermine their confidence in how they 'should' behave in any given context. This insecurity results in boys retreating from 'social' play and activities in favour of less threatening task orientated play activities such as riding bikes, construction and painting. Such stereotypical activities are reinforced as "boys being boys" and "he's just like his dad/granddad" and allow a retreat to the comfort of rewarding task oriented play, away from challenging imaginative or social interaction.

By the time students arrive at Kindergarten or Prep many have had up to five years of socialization and may already have solidified comfort zones of learning styles and play activities which they bring to school. Linguistically and in their ability to inhibit impulse they frequently and developmentally lag behind their female counterparts, despite often overshadowing their sisters in stamina, motor control and spatial awareness. However it is obvious that traditionally school values linguistic development over motor control. Linguistics are the tools of thought development and schools quickly move from primary (speech) language development to secondary (reading, writing and mathematical symbols) language development, often just as the boys have started to extend their use and understanding of oral language. If schools can provide additional opportunities for boys to fully explore the spoken language before progressing to secondary language development the maturation process would allow male/female progress to even itself out by grade three, rather than male academic performance continuing to fall progressively behind. Boys also need opportunities to closely link their concrete motor experiences with their secondary language development, allowing them to work from the known to the unknown from success to facing challenges with confidence.

**Strategies, which schools have adopted to improve boys learning and behaviour in school.**

The following strategies have all been effectively utilised by schools in differing contexts:

- Hands-on learning, practical activities working from preferred kinesthetic learning styles.
- Enterprise education, emphasis on collaborative learning styles with definable outcomes.
- Collaborative tasks, ways of delivering traditional curriculum in alternative ways.
- Peer-tutoring, developing and making use of existing 'mateship' relationships.
- Legitimate risk-taking, adventure education to engage disenfranchised boys.

- Open discussion and language development, focusing on primary language development rather than pre-empting secondary development.

Schools have endeavored to resolve some of the inequities of the system which disadvantage the boys learning and development, but many of the strategies employed have met resistance either from parent or community groups who see the intervention as either rewarding inappropriate behaviour if it is based on enjoyable pursuits or emasculating our boys if based on linguistics. To avoid this counter productive resistance any strategies employed need to have been developed from broad community based support with clear focus on the intended outcomes of the programs rather than the content itself.

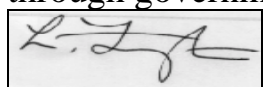
Most obviously successful in the pursuit of these ideals are the vocationally focused enterprise programs, which work in partnership with industry and the community. The emphasis on age appropriate learning tasks, which meet the needs of boys while increasing their self-esteem and confidence in their own ability to succeed.

An example of such a program is our own Studentworks (*formerly Launceston Student Workshop*) <http://www.tased.edu.au/tasonline/lsw>.

**How the successful strategies developed by schools may be made more effective or more broadly implemented.**

Successful strategies can be made more effective by local networking with organisations allowing greater knowledge of both the programs themselves and program outcomes. The most successful programs are closely allied with local industries or communities who raise the profile (and in doing so, the value) placed on the program itself and its outcomes. This partnership approach ensures consistent messages are relayed to boys about the expectations of others on their behaviour and learning.

Broad implementation of successful strategies can also be effected by a networking approach which could be built upon marketing and promotion of the case studies through government web sites or inter organisational visits.



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